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AFTER THIS, BIRDSONG

THERON SCHMIDT

The story is true.

That's me in the back.

Did you see the three people carrying the logs through the hallway? The third one is me.

So, I'm *there*.

Pulaski Park Fieldhouse, Chicago. I am one of the many bodies gathered just outside the frame: the cinematographer, the focus puller, the mic operator. The assistants who arrange the catering, the people who helped carry the equipment and lay the dolly tracks, the hired security guard required by the Parks Department. And me, writing in my notebook, staying out of shot. Except for this moment, when they ask for a few volunteers to help carry some fake trees.

And I'm also *then*.

It's February 2009. Lucy Cash and Goat Island have invited me to be a witness to the filming of two sequences that will become part of *A Last, A Quartet*. During this time, I speak at length with Lucy and with the company's director, Lin Hixson, as well as the five performers: Karen Christopher, Matthew Goulish, Mark Jeffery, Bryan Saner, and Litó Walkey. These are long conversations that drift in and around the emotions of the two days of filming: the intensity of making the work, as well as the awareness that this would be the group's final creative act together. So the thoughts that you read here are formed by these conversations.

And this writing is also a conversation with you, whom I do not know. Where are you when you watch these films? You may be one of several people gathered on the other side of the screen from where we are. Or maybe it's just you, on your own, with these films for companionship. You might be at your home, or in a library, or a classroom. You might be fortunate enough to be watching these films in their intended configuration: across four adjacent screens and with occasional glitter ball for *A Last, A Quartet*, or as two screens facing each other for *Daynightly They re-school you The Bears-Polka*. You might be someone who has seen a Goat Island performance, or you may be watching this long after they have all been forgotten.





These words move between two times, forming a thread that connects this weekend in Chicago with wherever and whenever you might find yourself now. But this duality of times and places, and the interrelatedness between them, is also one of the themes that these films explore in both their content and their form. *How can these two places talk to each other?* the films ask. *How are these two times happening at once?*

When you watch these films, *where are you?*

Let's have a change of scenery.

It begins with a shared space.

Karen tells me how Goat Island's process always begins with research that engages with *actual* spaces and *actual* relationships. *Actually trying to be*, she says. *Not talking about something, but doing it. Performing it. Activating it.*

For *The Lastmaker* – the Goat Island performance to which *A Last, A Quartet* stands in relation – this process begins with an interest in the Hagia Sophia, famous for its spectacular architecture but also its history of multiple uses: as a cathedral, then a mosque, and now a museum. Since Goat Island cannot afford to travel to Istanbul, they instead visit the Džamija in Zagreb (where they were already touring their work), which has a similar, though more compressed, history of changing use. From these investigations, they create a sequence that they refer to as the 'dome dance'. It follows a precise mathematical structure that moves in and out of phase, derived from the geometry of the mosque's dome, while its individual fragments of movement are responses to the architecture and multiple histories of the space.

In Chicago, they look for a location where they might film this sequence. Lucy and Bryan visit the Pulaski Park Fieldhouse. *Sure, you can see the space*, they are told, *but there are people using it right now.* They open the doors. And come across this group of people, dressed in medieval clothing, practicing swordplay. The story of Lancelot is one of the other reference points for *The Lastmaker*, and is explicitly referenced later in *Quartet* in the poem that Matthew rehearses. So to come across these practicing knights is an extraordinary serendipity.

It's almost like the space was uncovering something from the live performance and offering itself up to the film, Lucy says.

And as the camera begins its 360 degree journey through the fieldhouse, it is two of these modern-day knights whom it first encounters. They are here because of that thematic connection; but they are also here because, like Goat Island, they are some of the many users of this space. Passing them by, we linger over the 'dome dance', framed by a proscenium arch, as it evokes another architecture. One space is mapped onto another; one set of movement echoes actions from another time. The company descends into the auditorium before leaving the way we came in. 'U vezi sa,' they say, one last time. *In connection to.* They leave us alone in the empty room.

This is a process that begins and ends with a careful attention to space, to its histories and its other users. *What I really like about how Lucy works with texture,* Mark tells me, *is that it becomes this very tactile, this very embodied, this very intuitive relationship to space and to texture.* He describes the three longer films as a trilogy of types of space. *It's aching like birds* revisits the gymnasium and its intimate back spaces where Goat Island made their early work, and we feel its closeness, the sense of being locked-in. *Daynightly* is more institutional, occupying the place of learning; the film follows a strict rigour, a self-imposed constraint. And *Quartet*, as the finale, opens outward to explore the feeling of community. This fieldhouse is a civic space. An egalitarian space. One built for the people. One built for you and me.

Here, this dome-dancing camera says. Take it. It's yours.

There's a moment coming.

On the second day, we move into the corridor that runs outside the auditorium.

They seem more relaxed here, I write in my notebook. The company imagines that they have left the performance space, that it lays waiting while an audience gathers to greet them. Meanwhile they are running through their preparations: trying out fragments of the performance, remembering the words they will say, checking in with their bodies and with each other. They are not *really* performing. But neither are they not-performing.



They are in-between performance. Or perhaps beside-performance. Matthew describes this as a dynamic that is already inherent in *The Lastmaker*. *The actual performance is displaced somehow*, he says. *Sometimes we're preparing to do something, sometimes we actually do it, and sometimes we re-enact it and it's happened before.*

The Lastmaker is interwoven with references to Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac* (1974), and this section of *Quartet* is particularly haunted by that earlier film. But Litó also tells me how strongly she has been influenced by Bresson's thinking about acting, and by that slim volume, *Notes on the Cinematographer*. 'Nothing too much, nothing deficient,' Bresson writes. Litó talks about the influence of his idea of non-projection, and the importance of activity *as* activity. About being in the centre of activity and being as specific as possible. Like the swordfighters in the first shot, here the performers are remembering their performance, and also preparing themselves for it. Suspended between moments, this activity returns partly to its status as activity. Running. Doing forward rolls. Marking time. This activity partly returns, but not completely. It is not entirely in sync with itself.

If the first shot is about the texture of space, then this one brushes against the feeling of time. *When* is the gesture that each person performs? It sits in relation to its past and its future, both re-enactment and preparation. Karen practices her Lenny Bruce routine, adapted from the last filmed performance by Bruce and a few lines from George Carlin. This is a text about the slippery hold we have on the present. But her action is equally elusive: she is re-enacting an event at which she was not present, but which was captured on film. (*It's Aching Like Birds* also performs this kind of loop: actions learned from watching videos of Pina Bausch performances are mapped onto new bodies. Later they are filmed. The original degrades. A new original grows in its place.) Karen describes her new action as one of referral, not imitation; she borrows Bruce's rhythm, and some of his flinches, but she can only wonder what it would be like to have his fingers. His face.

And now you are watching Karen on film. 'There's a moment coming,' she says he says. When did this happen? Is it happening now? When is this 'now'? What does it feel like?

*The last take is hurried against the fading light, I write.
Snow barely forming. The late-afternoon sky.*

It's a perfect way to end a perfect day.

And then there's the child.

The performers leave the space, and a young girl takes over one of Litó's actions. She introduces a bird to the space. She moves the minarets of the model Hagia Sophia.

She means something different for each person I talk to. They're all wary of the heavy symbolism associated with children. Of reductive connotations of innocence, or sweetness. But they see something more than this in the gesture. Lin talks about the idea of legacy. Of what remains. Matthew talks about re-enactment and rehearsal. The way that children re-enact adulthood as a way to rehearse for their own futures. Litó recalls a specific suggestion Lucy gave the young performer: *you're performing for the bird*. And the bird was also there for her. For Karen, it's important that the symbolism remain open. *When something's only readable in one way and stops other possible readings*, she says, *then that can be a stumbling block for us*. And they all talk about how important it is that this is not just 'a child', but a specific person, with her own private life. She's the daughter of a friend, a part of the extended family – so in a way, she's been there all along.

And then the next time, she's not there.

I write in my notebook about the lastness of film. The irreversibility of the chemical imprint, the small aperture through which everything which is to be remembered must pass. The weight of the idea that whatever each performer does for the camera will forever be the definitive version.

But this idea of lastness is complicated by the use of two takes, each slightly different, to which we are alerted by the presence and then absence of the child. Neither version is definitive. This is not what these films are intended to be. They do not set out to document what is happening at some particular place, but are themselves part of the fabric of the event. The activities they depict are not fixed in their time, but are flickering between moments, looking behind them at the same time as they imagine what is to come. The anticipation of a memory. The remembrance of a future.

You're watching the performance of the echo of a performance, Matthew says. Here lastness is not final, but a shape that echoes forward and backward through time. And you, wherever you are, are part of this reverberation. These films do not capture or close the past, but open up a space for exchange. A moment of encounter between different spaces. Mine, back here, with the fake trees. And yours. Out there.

On the other side of the woods.

From the forest, the dark forest ...

The quartet is completed by two shots of a forest.

In one screen, the camera takes a close focus; in the other, it looks further off. In one, it is the middle of the afternoon and the light is evenly spread. The shadows of the clouds wander slowly over the forest floor. Two different horses pass through. The other is filmed at 'magic hour', just before sunset. Even in the short duration of this shot, you can see the sun move on its arc across the field of the image. We are spinning in its light.

Bryan talks about the simultaneity of these two kinds of spaces, the forest and the fieldhouse. He imagines it as a gesture of inclusiveness, a gesture of global respect. *It acknowledges that there's another world,* he says. *And that it is always there. And that it may have a relationship to us, even though we haven't thought about it.*

How can we cultivate our peripheral awareness? We share this moment together. But all around us, the forest breathes.

As if we were not here, the birds sing.

Theron Schmidt is a writer and performance-maker. He currently teaches theatre and performance studies at King's College London.